Chapter 7
Appreciative Inquiry: Mobilising Potentials Within Police Organisations to Realise Human Rights

Walter Suntinger and Moritz Birk

Contents

Abstract Deficit-orientation is still the default mode used to analyse and seek change of the social world, including in police organisations and in human rights practice. This contribution outlines the basic elements of a strength and resource-oriented look at furthering human rights realisation by the police, with the specific focus on the approach and method of Appreciative Inquiry. In line with systemic thinking, Appreciative Inquiry is widely used for organisational research and development in different areas. Social scientific research has shown Appreciative Inquiry to be successful in mobilising positive energy leading to desired change. The examples of its use in police trainings described in this contribution clearly highlight its potential to refocus attention on what already works well in police practice and

W. Suntinger (✉)
University of Applied Arts Vienna, Wien, Austria
e-mail: walter.suntinger@uni-ak.ac.at

M. Birk
Amnesty International, Vienna, Austria
e-mail: moritz.birk@protonmail.com

R. Alleweldt (ed.), *Fair Treatment of Persons in Police Custody*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-61737-9_7

how success stories can be harnessed to further strengthen police work in line with human rights standards.

7.1 Introduction: Context and Objectives

It is nowadays a truism to state that the biggest challenge in human rights is the "implementation gap," the gulf between human rights norms standards and the reality on the ground. How do we translate the seemingly lofty human rights into concrete practice on a daily basis? This question has been accompanying us since we have started our work in the field of human rights. And it has led us to search for new ways of thinking and acting with a view to effectively closing this gap, again: with a view to translating human rights norms into reality.

Some of the results of this attempt are contained in our publication showing the benefits of "systemic approaches to human rights practice."[1] Systems thinking[2] has proved to be useful for increasing both effectiveness and proper functioning of many organisations, in particular in the business sector. It consists of a set of scientifically well-grounded concepts which help explain and shape the social world and—equally important for practical implementation purposes—it provides a practical tool box for intervention.

In which way can systemic thinking help human rights practice?

We argue that human rights practice is still dominated by traditional epistemic approaches, in particular law-centred, often legalistic ones. Human rights are laid down as laws and, thus, lawyers obviously (must) play a big role. Many direct duty-bearers come from the executive branch, located in bureaucratic and legally structured systems, such as the police. Legal thinking is strongly determined by linear causal thinking; rightly so, as acts or omissions must be imputable to a person in order to impose penalties and other measures; that is, the causal link between act and actor has to be established. This perspective is necessary, but not sufficient for coming to grips with the challenges involved in human rights practice. As trained lawyers we believe that it requires a complementary thinking which allows to understand the broader picture of human interaction and life.

Systems thinking, we argue, provides for this broader perspective. It offers, first, a plausible theory of the social world and, second, a variety of tools for effecting sustainable change.[3] Developed in systemic consulting practice, these concepts and tools can very successfully enhance the impact of any social activity, including human rights practice. Systemic thinking is a vast field, and we do not have the space to present it here. So we confine ourselves to some general remarks. Systems

[1] Birk and Suntinger (2019).

[2] We use the terms "systemic" and "systems" thinking interchangeably.

[3] Birk and Suntinger (2019).

thinking produces a true shift in mindset, view and attention. If you adopt a systemic lens, you will never see the world in the same way as before. What, then, is different when you apply systemic thinking?

1. You know that there is no objective knowledge, but that any knowledge is subjectively constructed. "*Everything said is said by someone.*"[4] Constructivism thereby rejects the commonly held idea of the ability of objective observation and, thus, separating things neatly into true or false. In practical terms, this constructivist outlook means that we have to accept one crucial thing: multi-perspectivity. One's position and perspective is only *one* among many perspectives.
2. You understand that complexity, circular causality and unpredictability characterise (social) life. We commonly think: "If I do A—B happens." Instead, cybernetics assumes that things always occur in a "*reciprocal feedback loop*"[5] where cause and effect become indistinguishable: cause is always effect and effect is always cause. Adapting *Watzlawick's* famous example of a relationship between partners: one says: "I withdraw because you nag" and the other: "I nag because you withdraw," their behaviour becoming both the trigger and feedback within the communication.[6]
3. You accept that living systems (individuals and organisations) have a life of their own. They are autonomous, autopoietic and self-determined systems, not machines.[7] Thus, they cannot be controlled and changed directly from the outside. However, in order to ensure a necessary degree of stability and efficiency, individuals learn to trivialise themselves to some degree in a system to become more predictable, by adhering to certain established rules, codes and agreements. In other words, systems develop patterns of communication to maintain stability and reduce complexity.

Box 7.1 Systemic thinking in a nutshell

The following "systemic principles"[8] can serve as guides for the practical application of systems thinking:

(continued)

[4] Maturana and Varela (1992), p. 27.

[5] Seliger (2014), pp. 54 et seq.

[6] Watzlawick et al. (1967), p. 56.

[7] For a summary, see Seliger (2014), pp. 59 et seq., building on the foundational work of Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela (1992).

[8] This version of the ten systemic principles is taken from Suntinger and Birk (2021), where they are applied to preventive monitoring of places of detention. For a first presentation in a broader form, see Birk and Suntinger (2019), pp. 659–663.

Box 7.1 (continued)

1. Begin with the end in mind, developing a concrete image of the desired future.
2. Look at the whole picture instead of focusing only on parts and elements.
3. See relations and connections instead of singular events.
4. Engage with complexity and circularity: causes as effects and effects as causes.
5. Seek actively and integrate different viewpoints and multiple perspectives.
6. Look at the "bottom of the iceberg" and understand underlying cultural patterns.
7. Look at failures in the system, not in persons.
8. Look at resources and strengths, not only deficits.
9. Look for entry points and connections, while recognising the limits of intervention.
10. Include ongoing reflection and self-reflection.

In this article we focus specifically on the slogan "Look at resources and strengths, not only deficits." The slogan builds on the idea that strengths and resources can be used to support and sustain desired change processes.

This refocusing, this shift of mind, constitutes a move away from a deficit-oriented view which still dominates much of contemporary thinking. Deficit-orientation is still the default mode of the social world, and this includes both police and human rights work.

In line with this assumption, the objective of this contribution is to outline the basic elements of a strength and resource-oriented look at human rights realisation by police, i.e. the method of "Appreciative Inquiry," and present some initial thoughts and possible ways forward for exploring and testing out of such an approach.

We start with a brief presentation of the approach of and basic principles underlying Appreciative Inquiry (Section 7.2), we then present—as the main part—how this approach can be applied in endeavours to strengthen human rights in the field of policing, with specific reference to the International Police conference—where we tried it out (Section 7.3), and end with some tentative conclusions as well as proposals for the way forward (Section 7.4).

It is important to bear in mind that this is our first attempt to develop this type of thinking and, thus, has its obvious limitations. It is informed by the lived experience of the authors, but is not based on explicit empirical research.

7.2 Appreciative Inquiry

"Appreciative Inquiry" (AI)[9] is one of the most popular approaches to organisational research and development that take resource-orientation seriously. AI is located within the broader context of the burgeoning field known as "positive organizational studies" and the "strength-based" movement.[10] Developed in the 1980s at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, as an action research method, its basic assumptions are simple:

1. Every organisation has something that works well.
2. Systems and organisations develop in the direction which is the focus of attention or "inquiry."
3. If strengths, resources and potentials are brought into the focus of attention and appreciatively identified, organisations will develop in this direction.
4. This benefits all and has great mobilising power, strongly needed in the face of obstacles and hindrances.

7.2.1 A Practice-Oriented Definition of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is both a very specific look at and a useful tool for transforming social reality, based on a firm social scientific grounding.[11] In the words of the pioneers of this approach:

> Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. The inquiry is mobilized through the crafting of the 'unconditional positive question', often involving hundreds or thousands of people. AI interventions focus on the speed of imagination and innovation instead of the negative, critical, and spiralling diagnoses commonly used in organizations. The discovery, dream, design, and destiny model links the energy of the positive core to changes never thought possible.[12]

This is a very helpful description of AI and elements of it will be visible throughout the following parts of this paper.

---

[9] See Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), Cooperider et al. (2008), Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010).

[10] Bushe (2011), p. 87.

[11] See ibid. and Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), pp. 49–51.

[12] Cooperider et al. (2008), p. 3.

7.2.2 *Settings/Types of Use*

Appreciative inquiry can take different forms, ranging from the use of the Appreciative Inquiry Interview to a whole-scale organisational change process.

The Appreciative Inquiry interview is at the heart of any AI application and therefore a natural starting point for showing its logic. It is a one-and-one interview, an exercise in story-telling, of positive experiences of the past, the identification of individual and collective strengths and potentials that we have in the present as well as a bold look at how these strengths can be used for achieving a positive future image. Two persons interview each other along some fairly standardised questions (that can be adapted to the concrete situation):[13]

1. Describe a time in your organisation that you consider a high point experience, a time when you were most engaged and felt alive and vibrant.
2. Without being modest, tell me what it is that you most value about yourself, your work, and your organisation.
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organisation when it is at its best?
4. Imagine your organisation ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be. What is different? How have you contributed to this dream organisation?

These interview questions structure a movement: from the positive past to the experience of strengths and life-giving core factors in the present on to concrete visions of a positive future.

Box 7.2 Appreciative Inquiry—4D Model

This basic movement (past-present-future) also guides broader designs of AI-based change processes. AI's standard whole-scale change process is known as the 4D Model, which is "now almost universally described as *the* AI method."[14] It consists of four stages:

1. Discovery: on the basis of an AI interview, participants identify the positive and the life-giving factors: "the best of what is."
2. Dream: Participants co-create a results-oriented concrete vision for a given social system: "What might be."

   In addition, and in order to make the vision concrete on the basis of existing resources and strengths, the movement moves back to present.
3. Design: Participants create concrete propositions/thinking guidelines for shaping the organisation: "What should be."

(continued)

[13] Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), p. 14.

[14] Bushe (2011), p. 88.

Box 7.2 (continued)

4. Destiny: Participants develop concrete action of implementation: "What will be."

Application of this 4D Model of AI obviously varies. Many formats include what is known as an AI-Summit, an ambitious whole-scale change design which might spread over several days and which brings the different stakeholders from all parts of the system in a forum for learning.

Of these two basic uses of AI, this contribution focuses on the basic form, the AI interview and its potentials for getting change going. It is the most flexible form of use found in a variety of contexts and probably often done in a superficial way.[15] We find this quality of easy and flexible adaptation of AI interviews to different settings a particular asset of the method, in particular when working in the bureaucratic government sector where broader reform and change processes are difficult to get going. On the other hand, in order to understand how to apply AI in a sound way, we agree that it is necessary to have a firm grasp of the underlying concepts and principles. If not, the application of AI might not work out. "A fool with a tool is still a fool." This saying used in systemic consulting circles encapsulates the danger of applying tools without proper grounding.

7.2.3 Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

In the following, we present five principles which are widely accepted as the conceptual basis of Appreciative Inquiry.[16] They are in line with the ideas and slogans of systemic thinking as outlined above.

The five principles are:

1. The constructionist principle:[17] AI grew out of social constructionism as developed by, i.e. Kenneth Gergen.[18] All social reality is constructed; human knowledge and social life are interwoven. "Words create worlds"[19] is often used as a slogan to succinctly express this principle. Reality is constructed through language and communication. This means that attention is shifted from the

[15] See the critique in Fry (2008), p. VIII.

[16] See Bushe (2011), pp. 89 et seq.

[17] A note on terminology: The term "social constructionism" is widely used in the US social science tradition, while the term "constructivism" is more generally employed in epistemology. There is convergence on basic points of practical relevance for our purpose.

[18] Gergen (2001).

[19] Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), p. 51.

individual to relationships, connections and communication. "From cogito ergo sum to communicamos ergo sum."[20]

2. The simultaneity principle: Inquiry is at the same time intervention into a given system, in line with the constructionist perspective. Inquiry and intervention are inseparable and intertwined. What you ask about produces at the same time changes. Questions are the essential element of the inquiry. Good questions might bring to light new things and change your whole perspective (e.g. in so-called "Aha" moments). There is broad evidence of this in particular in therapeutic settings. In a broader sense, this principle says: whatever we do and say has an effect.
3. The poetic principle: Rather than being machines, organisations are dynamic living systems, they are like "open books."[21] Much of life in living systems is expressed in stories, told in the kitchen and on the corridors. These stories are co-authored. What kind of stories are told and shared is important. AI helps to unearth positive stories of achievement and high energy moments.
4. The anticipatory principle: Images of the future guide and inspire present-day actions.[22] "Much like a movie projector on a screen, human systems are forever projecting a horizon of expectations ahead of themselves."[23] Creating positive images, showing potentials and elaborating possibilities helps organisations achieve concrete results. It belongs to the most important aspects of any change process. Existing research, including image theory, clearly supports this.[24]
5. The positive principle: A search for the positive leads to positive change and better relations. As AI practitioners know from experience, the focus on the positive tends to produce positive affect and emotions and strengthens relationships and social bonding. It thus enhances energy and amplifies the positive core, the existing wisdom, successful strategies, positive attitudes and affect, skills, resources and capabilities.[25]

As experienced by AI practitioners and supported by scientific research, AI has clear benefits:

- It allows identification of new aspects of reality which have previously not been seen, the positive ones. Thus, it helps draw a more complete picture of the social reality.
- It helps create a positive self-image grounded in actual experience ("the high points").
- This, in turn, can lead to enhancing positive emotions and energy for effecting desired change.

---

[20] Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), p. 50.

[21] Ibid., 51.

[22] Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), p. 60.

[23] Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), p. 52.

[24] For a discussion, see Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), p. 49.

[25] Ibid., p. 64.

- More generally, research has found that AI works because it helps liberate positive power through a set of facilitating conditions which revolve around freedom, the so-called "Six Freedoms":[26] freedom to be known in relationship, freedom to be heard, freedom to dream in community, freedom to choose to contribute, freedom to act with support, freedom to be positive.

7.2.4 *Use of Appreciative Inquiry to Strengthen Human Rights*

Considering the immense potential benefits of Appreciative Inquiry, we have attempted to explore this tool to increase effectiveness in our human rights work. We are following in the steps of other actors. For example, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has recommended the method of Appreciative Inquiry to enhance knowledge sharing as a "a method of organizational development that engages all levels of an organization (and its stakeholders) in its renewal, change and improved performance."[27] Moreover, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated:

> I would like to commend you more particularly for your methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society, and government.[28]

Appreciative inquiry has also been used in NGO-contexts and for community and societal projects, including the development field.[29]

Moreover, the method has been used in prison research in order to analyse the work of prison officers and the importance of staff-prisoner relationships. In their ground-breaking work, Liebling, Price and Elliot illustrate the use of AI to study relationships in a maximum-security prison in the UK. They used AI to move away from a "problem-centred" to an "empathetic approach" assuming that it "might have particular value in a sensitive and beleaguered organization in which staff often felt at the receiving end of sometimes vague criticism."[30] The approach seeks not to deny the problems in prisons but to specifically look at the positive realities, resources, imaginations of staff and prisoners shifting the focus from deficits to accomplishments and achievements. In this sense it was used as a method of action research, fostering at the same time self-confidence, energy and faith as a creative

---

[26] Ibid., pp. 270 et seq. The six freedoms are most clearly present in broader change processes, based on the AI 4D cycle.

[27] Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (2011) p. 22.

[28] Former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, speaking to the United Nations Leaders' Summit in mid-2004. Ibid., p. 22.

[29] See examples in Cooperider et al. (2008) and Elliot (1999).

[30] Liebling et al. (1999), p. 75.

and future oriented process.[31] The tool used was a "lightly structured talk," conducted in a narrative form to induce storytelling. It was based on an appreciative protocol with generative questions that were not followed strictly but were "designed to move and hold the interviewee in appreciative mode while a particular topic is explored."[32]

The researchers found that prison staff interviewed responded enthusiastically to unconditional positive regard, and that the AI approach turned out to be very effective to earn trust, generate open communication and stimulate cooperation and interest.[33] Yet, although the researchers felt that they had "broken new ground," the method also had its restrictions. The strong tendency towards negativity and despair limited the imaginative horizons of the participants. Thus, within the limited frame of this research, the full transformative potential as a method of action research remained underexplored.[34] Nevertheless the researchers concluded that the method "opened doors to data and interpretations that may have remained firmly shut in other research environments, and it clearly made a significant difference to the way at least some prison officers conceived of their role." Considering the effects it had on prison officers they hold the opinion that "as an instrument for change, the possibilities are endless."[35]

Their other findings highlighted the importance of prisoner-staff relationships and pointed out that the important "*peacekeeping work*" ("negotiating peaceful co-existence") of prison staff is "under-valued, under-theorized and under-estimated."[36] They explained this, inter alia, with the fact that the work of a prison officer is usually considered as successful if it is quiet and nothing happens. However, the authors rightly emphasise that the work of resolving and avoiding conflict should not be seen as omissions but as acts requiring considerable skill.[37] There are clear parallels to the work of police officers who also hold an unusual amount of power which is most of the time held in reserve. Rather than their mere law enforcement, police work is about their peacekeeping function achieved through conversations, mediating and deescalating.[38] But this role is often overlooked, and police often complain about a lack of recognition or even hostile behaviour[39] by citizens as their work is often criticised by NGOs, the media and in the public discourse.

---

[31] Ibid., p. 76.

[32] Ibid., p. 79—with a copy of the protocol used.

[33] Ibid., p. 89.

[34] Ibid., pp. 91–92.

[35] Ibid., p. 92.

[36] Ibid., pp. 90–91.

[37] Ibid., p. 81.

[38] For an overview, see Reiner (2015).

[39] See, e.g. reports from Germany stating that attacks on police officers have risen by 22% from 2013 to 2017: FAZ, Gewalt gegen Polizisten nimmt zu, 24.08.2018, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/angriffe-auf-beamte-gewalt-gegen-polizisten-nimmt-zu-15754577.html (last accessed on 29 April 2023).

7.3 Application in Police Context

7.3.1 Trying It Out

Inspired by the promising potential and experiences in similar contexts we were eager to test the potential of this method to strengthen human rights performance of police organisations. Two experiences of application are shown in this section.

Since the conference and the drafting of this article highly interesting research has been published on the use and value of appreciative inquiry in police research, particularly in police ethnography, including in the Global South.[40] The subtitle of one publication "Appreciative Inquiry in ethnography for understanding and transforming policing" points to the double value of this methodological approach: First, it can contribute to knowledge production about policing at a global scale. Second, it can help "co-create positive changes in the policing field."[41]

7.3.1.1 The Berlin Conference

We are very grateful to the organisers of the International Conference "Fair Treatment of Persons in Police Custody" to have given us the opportunity to present the method and try it out in a workshop to "mobilise potentials within police organizations to realize human rights." The workshop brought together conference participants and police students of the Brandenburg State Police University who had already made practical experiences in police operations. After a short introduction to the method of Appreciative Inquiry and its benefits we separated the participants in groups. Police officers and police students were asked to interview each other and inquire in an appreciative, resource-oriented manner on their experiences in protecting fundamental rights during police work. They were asked to listen patiently without judging the answers or assuming than one already knew what the other person was about to say and adopt an open-minded attitude, curious to learn new things. The participants who were not police officers acted as observers and had to keep time of the interviews, listen and take notes. Four questions were asked (see guiding questions below).

The first one inquired about the students' past and the reason behind the decision to become a police officer. This was supposed to bring back the possible "magic of the beginning," the fascination for the job. Not surprisingly, but important to note, most students actually wanted to become police officers in order to serve and protect others and ensure a safe and secure society. The protection of the human rights of persons thus showed to be a key driver for the job choice of police officers. It was also precisely this close work with people and the feeling of serving society that was

[40] Jardine and van Dijk (2023); Jardine (2023), Jardine (2020) Skinns et al. (2022).

[41] Jardine and van Dijk (2023), p. 320.

described as a key element that "connects" the students to the job and the police organisation.

The second question aimed at specifically inquiring about the positive experience in police work to protect fundamental rights. The students were asked to recount a "highpoint experience" in their work. While the challenge in this part of the interview is the willingness of participants to get involved as well as to be concrete enough and not move into generalisations,[42] the participants all managed to find an example from their recent practical experience and describe why it was so valuable to them. The experiences referred to complex situations from intervening in a domestic violence case to handling a person with a mental impairment and showed the high sensitivity and professionalism police officers need to apply in their daily work.

With questions three and four, students were led to take closer look at their own value and strengths they bring to work as well as the greatest strength of their organisation in respecting and protecting human dignity.

Questions for the interview:

1. Please remember the start of your career as police officer:
   - What attracted you to select this profession?
   - What do still like the most about it nowadays?
2. Think about a situation in your work as police that you consider a highpoint experience/where you felt you did a truly good job (in respecting and/or protecting human dignity) of which you are still proud and feel positive about.
   - What was the situation?
   - Who was involved?
   - What was your role in it? What difference were you able to make?
   - What does this situation still make particularly valuable for you?
3. In the light of this experience and without modesty: describe what do you value most about yourself? What are your most salient strengths and gifts that you bring to your work?
4. Where is your organisation at its best in respecting and protecting human dignity?

In the plenary discussion many police students readily shared that they found the exercise not easy because they were not used to specifically focus on their resources and strengths. They stated that there was a general "complaint culture" in the police force with the focus on what works badly. Some said that they only received

[42] See Liebling (1999), p. 80.

feedback when they did something wrong and the coverage from the outside, e.g. by the media or from human rights organisations, is experienced as overwhelmingly negative. Therefore, they described the exercise as a very valuable new experience that generated positive energy and brought to light the many strengths and potentials of the police in protecting human dignity. The participants specifically mentioned their communication skills as a highlight, treating everyone as a human being with respect and empathy. Moreover, the motivation to protect others, the victim, the offender, their colleagues and themselves is always described as the priority. They also commended the strong comradery among their colleagues, working together, looking out for each other.

In the final discussions and the anonymous feedback forms the exercise was recognised as useful to identify what already works well and how to build on that. It showed that Appreciative Inquiry can motivate police officers to reflect on the issue of policing and human rights and promote positive attitudes and to see the work of the police as an organisation to protect human rights. The method makes visible that human rights are always a key issue in police work. The students recommended repeating the exercise with police officers that have served for longer time. While for new recruits the thought of having joined the police force to protect and secure (including the learnings from the human rights courses) is still present, this may fade out after decades of serving, and officers may become unaware of the possibilities and potentials they have to react to in their daily work. For longer serving police officers, the reminder of the "magic of the beginning" may be specifically powerful and the positive focus specifically energising and liberating. Some even recommended to consider doing such exercise with new and experienced officers to exchange different perspectives on work, learn from each other (across generations and fields) and strengthen the companionship/solidarity among "young and old" and across departments.

7.3.1.2 Trainings of Austrian Police Officers

The context of this case of application of Appreciative Inquiry is the following:[43] Austrian street police officers who get promoted to the first management rank undergo a six months classroom training, spread over a period of nine months, including intermittent practice phases. One of the modules is a two and a half days training workshop on human rights. Its broad objectives are: (1) A sound understanding of the role of police with regard to human rights, including its positive role as protector of human rights; (2) A sound understanding of basic concepts of human rights and structures/mechanisms to realise them; (3) Analytical skills in applying human rights to concrete cases of police practice; and (4) Self-critical reflection on basic assumptions, including stereotypes. The trainings are held by an experienced police trainer in tandem with an external person active in the human rights field,

[43] See https://www.bmi.gv.at/104/Beruf_und_Karriere/start.aspx#e2a (accessed on 29 April 2023).

including one of the authors, Walter Suntinger. Designs of the human rights module are in a constant state of development. Recently, and as a consequence of the above-described Berlin workshop, an AI interview exercise was introduced in the afternoon of the first day. Prior to this exercise, participants will have expressed their expectations, had a first discussion of relevant human rights issues, including on the basis of a discussion of articles in current newspapers, and an exposition of the basics of human rights. In particular, they will know that police work is essentially human rights work, if they take the state obligation to protect seriously and to its logical end. [44] The prime example for showing this is domestic violence. This first positive reframing of police in light of human rights sets a positive and—at the same time—a more complete frame for the training.

The exercise of Appreciative Inquiry is a continuation of this approach. The basic setting is similar to the one described above. (1) Participants (regularly around 30) are asked to interview each other in pairs along the questions above, slightly adapted; (2) In a subsequent discussion in groups of 6 (3 pairs), participants are asked to share their story if they want (participants are free not to do so) and choose 2 or 3 stories to share in the plenary; (3) In the final plenary discussion, participants listen to the stories, discuss their human rights implication and are asked to share their learning from the exercise.

The following is an anecdotal description of some major results that are related to the above characteristics of AI. It is based on our own observation of the process and persons involved, but also on oral and written feedback given by co-trainers and participants. The themes of the stories shared can be broadly categorised along the human rights obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the most basic rights, the rights to physical integrity and the right to life. Police officers expressed satisfaction about professionally carrying out an action involving the use of force and leading to the arrest of suspects, while strictly abiding by the principle of proportionality and caring for persons injured in a professional way. Often mentioned are stories where police intervened in situations of domestic violence: protecting the victims of domestic violence, while keeping calm and respecting the rights of the perpetrator, and at the same time caring for children present. Furthermore, stories about their action to prevent suicides through determined action and/or empathic communication appear frequently in the stories told.

The most important strengths of police officers that become visible in these interviews are: courage, determination, empathy, firm sense of humanity, professionalism and negotiation/communication skills.

Reflections on the exercise tend to highlight the following:

- New aspects of their work become visible. "Interesting, we have understood new things" or "wow, we had never seen this before."
- However, looking at the positive aspects constitutes a challenge for many people in a job that is so much concerned with the difficult aspects of social life.

[44] See, in detail, Suntinger (2018), pp. 297–298.

- The positive emotions that accompany telling their story and the subsequent discussion in the plenary are strongly felt.
- Discussions revolve around the way in which such positive story-telling[45] can be integrated in daily practice.

The positive image of police as a professional actor for protecting and respecting human rights seems to be clearly strengthened.

7.3.2 Possible Uses

Based on these experiences, we draw the conclusion that Appreciative Inquiry can be useful to strengthen police organisations in different ways. This conclusion is strongly supported by the recently published research mentioned above (see FN 40).

First, it bears great potential **for organisational development**. It can be used by leaders in staff talks and meetings to enquire about the resources and promising practices in the organisation in order to build on as well as to motivate staff to learn and grow. It can equally be a very helpful tool for external consultants to gather valuable information and develop options for organisational reform. It can be a helpful element of police training and an instrument for police engagement with the community.[46]

In a similar way it can be a strong tool of **research** to find out about the resources and strengths in police organisations—what actually works and really matters—and thus bring to light new elements otherwise uncovered. As mentioned, and in keeping with the above-mentioned principles of Appreciative Inquiry, in particular the simultaneity principles, the research can itself lead to positive change and thus has transformational potential.[47] Moreover, Appreciative Inquiry has proved to be helpful in getting access to the field[48] and to create an environment of trust between the researcher and those being involved in the research. Specifically in settings such as prisons or police organisations there exists a certain caution or resistance to cooperate with researchers out of fear of being criticised. This could be overcome by the consistent focus on resources and the positive offered by the Appreciative Inquiry method.

---

[45] On the fundamental importance of story-telling in police, see Waddington (1999).

[46] For example, the Appreciative Inquiry event in Cheetham Hill, UK brought together 130 persons to hear their positive experiences from living in the community, what is important from them and what they expect from policing. Reportedly it was a very successful way to learn from and engage with citizens while sending the message that the police cares about their views, problems and need. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=118&v=glSHbM2WxzI (last accessed on 29 April 2023).

[47] Jardine and van Dijk (2023), summarising existing research.

[48] Jardine (2020), pp. 191 et seq., Skinns et al. (2022), p. 4.

This trust-building can also be very useful for **monitoring** police institutions. Indeed, we specifically recommend Appreciative Inquiry as a useful tool for National Preventive Mechanisms mandated to monitor places of detention and prevent torture and ill-treatment.[49] Our own experience using it in monitoring have shown that a positive framing is positively received by the authorities who are showing an increasing "monitoring fatigue," being served the same findings and recommendations again and again.[50] Furthermore, the same conclusions as for research and organisational development apply for monitors who, with the help of Appreciative Inquiry, can identify strengths and resources in the system and make recommendations and support police organisations to achieve change.

7.4 Challenges in the Application of Appreciative Inquiry

Despite the great potential of Appreciative Inquiry one should not ignore the challenges in its application.[51] These challenges are partly intrinsic in the use of AI in general, partly they result from the specific field of application: human rights within police.

First, it is important to consider AI not as magic cure but just as a possible tool among many. We want to emphasise that we believe that it is most useful if it is strategically embedded in the given context and used as part of an overall systemic approach to human rights and police work.

One of the common critiques is that Appreciative Inquiry might invalidate negative experiences.[52] This would of course be particularly problematic in the area of human rights if it meant ignoring or not taking seriously human rights violations and its victims. In line with a strategic approach, the use of AI needs to be clearly and critically reflected and balanced with other tools.

This might also mean that it would not be feasible in certain circumstances, particularly in situation of crisis and massive human rights violations. It may simply be unsuitable, unjustified or send a wrong message to focus on the positive in such an environment. At the same time, in situations of despair, Appreciative Inquiry may be the only way out of the negative and to find solutions. Like with other interventions and methods, it is also important to consider the cultural setting in which AI is used.[53] Moreover, the benefit of this method presupposes a general willingness of

[49] Suntinger and Birk (2021), pp. 36–37; Birk and Suntinger (2019), p. 674.

[50] Birk et al. (2015), p 16; Suntinger and Birk (2021).

[51] For a discussion of the limitations of AI in policing ethnography, see Jardine and van Dijk (2023), p. 330. These points strongly overlap with ours.

[52] Bushe (2011), p. 96.

[53] For a Southern Policing perspective, see the highly interesting work of Jardine (2020) and Jardine (2023) on policing in Vietnam. She provides "a theoretical framework to understand how variations in police cultures, practices and socialization occur in a distinctly non-Western context." Jardine (2020), p. 188.

the authorities to improve and to undertake genuine efforts to strengthen human rights.

7.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we strongly believe in the potential of Appreciative Inquiry for understanding and transforming police work. The anecdotal results of our practical training approach are supported by thorough empirical research of policing. AI can be used in in numerous ways and different contexts: internally and by external consultants, by trainers, researchers and monitors. It may not always be easy but if carefully reflected and skilfully embedded in the right context it will usually yield promising results and steer an organisation towards positive change. We believe it is worth for different actors and in different situations to have the courage to try it out, and we are committed to continue to explore it as a key tool for systemic change management in our human rights practice. The question of the founders of Appreciative Inquiry seems pertinent also in the field of police: "What would happen to our change practices if we began all our work with the positive presumption that organizations, as centers of human relatedness, are alive with infinite constructive capacity?"[54]

References

Birk M, Suntinger W (2019) A systemic approach to human rights practice. In: Hladschik P, Steinert F (eds) Making human rights work. Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, Vienna

Birk M, Zach G, Suntinger W, Long D, Murray R (2015) Enhancing impact of national preventive mechanisms. Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights/University of Bristol, Vienna

Bushe G (2011) Appreciative inquiry. Theory and critique. In: Boje D, Burnes B, Hassard J (eds) The Routledge companion to organizational change. Routledge, Oxford, pp 87–103

Cooperider D, Whitney D, Stavros J (2008) Appreciative inquiry handbook. For leader of change, 2nd edn. Crown Custom Publisher, Brunswick

Cooperrider D, Whitney D (2005) Appreciative inquiry. A positive revolution in change. Berret-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

Elliot C (1999) Locating the energy for change: an introduction to appreciative inquiry. International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg

Fry R (2008) Foreword. In: Cooperider D, Whitney D, Stavros J (eds) Appreciative inquiry handbook. For leader of change, 2nd edn. Crown Custom Publisher, Brunswick, pp VI–X

Gergen KJ (2001) Social construction in action. Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi

Jardine M (2020) A Southern policing perspective and appreciative inquiry: an ethnography of policing in Vietnam. Policing Soc 30(2):186–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2019.1680673

[54] Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), p. 3.

Jardine M, (2023) Policing in a changing Vietnam. Towards a global account of policing. Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York

Jardine M, van Dijk A (2023) Why do positive experiences matter? Appreciative inquiry in ethnography for understanding and transforming policing. In: Fleming J, Charman S (eds) Routledge international handbook of police ethnography. Routledge, pp 319–334

Liebling A, Price D, Elliot C (1999) Appreciative inquiry and prison relationships. Punishm Soc 1(1):71–98

Maturana H, Varela FJ (1992) The tree of knowledge. Shambhala, Boston

Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (2011) Share, learn, innovate! Methods and technologies to share human rights knowledge and ideas, New York/Geneva 2011

Reiner R (2015) Revisiting the classics: three seminal founders of the study of policing: Michael Banton, Jerome Skolnick and Egon Bittner. Policing Soc 25(3):308–327

Seliger R (2014) The Jungle book of leadership. A navigation system for leaders. Carl-Auer Verlag, Heidelberg

Skinns L, Wooff A, Sprawson A (2022) 'My best day will be my last day!': appreciating appreciative inquiry in police research. Policing Soc 32(6):731–747

Suntinger W (2018) Police training and international human rights standards. In: Alleweldt R, Fickenscher G (eds) The police and international human rights law. Springer, Leiden/Boston, pp 279–304

Suntinger W, Birk M (2021) Systemic thinking in preventive human rights monitoring - a Dossier for national preventive mechanisms. Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights, Vienna, https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/dossier_systemic_thinking_lbi_gmr.pdf. Accessed 4 July 2023

Waddington PAJ (1999) Police (canteen) sub-culture. An appreciation. Br J Criminol 31(2): 287–309

Watzlawick P, Beavin J, Jackson D (1967) Pragmatics of human communication. A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes. W.W. Norton & Company, New York

Whitney D, Trosten-Bloom A (2010) The power of appreciative inquiry. A practical guide to positive change. Berret-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

Walter Suntinger is a human rights consultant, trainer and university lecturer. Since 2021, he is a Senior Lecturer and the Academic Programme Manager of the Vienna Master of Arts in Applied Human Rights at the University of Applied Arts. He holds a law degree from the University of Graz (1990), with a specialisation in human rights law, and a certificate in systemic change management from the Steinbeis University/Berlin (2019). His areas of specialisation are: preventing monitoring of places of detention, human rights reform and training in the police and the criminal justice system, consulting activities for business. He has produced academic work (on torture, asylum law, monitoring, training, systemic approaches to human rights) and several practical tools, e.g. police training manuals and guidance documents for preventive human rights monitoring. Furthermore, as a Managing Partner at HumanRightsConsulting Vienna (HRCV) he advises business enterprises on how to integrate human rights in their policies and operations. His training and consulting journeys took him, inter alia, to South Africa, Kosovo, Armenia, Brazil, Turkey, Tunisia, Mauritania, Morocco and other countries. He is currently a lecturer at the University of Applied Arts, FH Campus Wien and the University of Vienna. Previous teaching assignments were at: the John Hopkins University—Bologna Center, the University of Oregon (study abroad program in Vienna), the European Peace University in Stadschlaining and the University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt (Security Studies).

Moritz Birk LL.M. is an independent consultant, trainer and lecturer. From 2020 to 2023 he was the Advocacy and Research Director at Amnesty International Austria where he focused specifically on policing and human rights. He was moreover member of the Human Rights Advisory Board of the Austrian Ombudsman Board as part of the National Preventive Mechanism.

Previously he worked as Senior Researcher (2010–2012) and Head of the Department 'Human Dignity and Public Security' (2012–2020) at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Fundamental and Human Rights leading a team of experts researching, advocating, consulting and training on the prevention of torture and ill-treatment worldwide. He is the co-editor and author of the Oxford Commentary to the UN Convention against Torture. From 2009 to 2010, he served as the assistant of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Manfred Nowak, and before that worked with human rights organisations in Sweden, Mexico, Senegal and Ghana. He lectures on human rights law and practice at the University of Vienna and Frankfurt (Oder), Germany.

He holds a German law degree (Humboldt University Berlin) and a degree in international human rights law (Lund University, Sweden) and is certified as systemic organisational consultant and coach.